On the Dial Watergate file

Liddy vs. Limbaugh Nationwide?

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Just when the feds are breathing down Infinity Broadcasting's corporate neck for things uttered by Manhattan mouth Howard Stern, Infinity President Mel Karmazin is excited about the possibility of offering several high-profile throats in his stable, including WJFK-AM/FM's (1300/106.7) G. Gordon Liddy, to stations coast to coast.

"We want to do [for radio] what KingWorld and Paramount have done for television syndication," Karmazin said, adding that he told Liddy, "I'm going to make it happen." Karmazin said he hopes to offer Liddy's daily four-hour midday talk show to stations nationally as soon as early next month. (The Arbitron winter ratings survey begins Jan. 7, a point not lost on Karmazin.)

Liddy, whose show has been a ratings bonanza since it debuted Feb. 3, said Sunday that any syndication package would give him a 50-50 cut in the revenues. That could be considerable if his success grows: In the spring survey, Liddy's show claimed a 5.0 share of the audience age 25 to 54, or 123,400 weekly listeners in Washington and Baltimore.

Infinity, which owns 17 stations, including WJFK, is facing a whopping $315,000 fine for a series of Stern bits that aired last year. Last month the Federal Communications Commission levied a $105,000 fine against Greater Media Inc.'s KLSX-FM in Los Angeles, which airs Stern's New York-based show. The commission is expected to announce this week a trebled fine for Infinity's WXRK-FM in New York, WYSP-FM in Philadelphia and WJFK.

Karmazin said he believes Liddy, whose style and subjects are completely different from those of Stern, has "national appeal. It's a hot show and we think he can beat Rush Limbaugh, particularly in younger demos." That's a tall order. Conservative gabmaster Limbaugh, heard weekdays from noon to 3 on more than 520 stations nationally—including WMAL-AM (630) here and WCBM-AM (630) in Baltimore—is the nation's most-listened-to talk host, heard by nearly 13 million a week.

Karmazin also expects to put New York morning personality Don Imus (of Infinity-owned WFAN-AM) and Doug "Greaseman" Tracht on the syndication menu. Tracht is under contract to WWDC-FM (101.1) through next month but will join Infinity—probably broadcasting from Los Angeles—in early February. Karmazin said the WJFK afternoon team of Don Geronimo and Mike O'Meara will also be offered for syndication.

Meanwhile, Liddy was surprised yesterday on his 62nd birthday by some wacky loyalists, including Sally Heber, president of the American Ferret Association. Heber presented the former Watergate co-conspirator with a ferret and named him to the "High Order of the Ferret." And Brad Stone, an in-studio spokesman for the group, donned a full-length ferret suit, complete with headgear. Liddy wasn't an unlikely recipient for the "honor" since he frequently refers to Watergate nemesis John Dean as "the weasel."